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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: RADICAL ORTHODOX GROUP STOPS MOSQUE CONSTRUCTION; LOCAL AUTHORITIES SUPPORT AZERI COMMUNITY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On September 16, representative of two radical fundamentalist Georgian Orthodox groups, the "Society of Saint David the Builder" and "Union of Orthodox Parents" stopped construction on a mosque in the village of Talaveri. The groups demanded to see the villagers' construction permit and threatened residents with violence if the construction did not cease. The people of the traditionally ethnic Azeri village were making repairs on their 104 year-old mosque and had not obtained official permission for the work. The Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the Sheik-Ul-Islam for Muslims of the Caucuses negotiated a suspension of the construction until official permission could be obtained. Officially, only the permission of the Ministry of Culture is required as this mosque has been designated as a historical building. However, the unofficial blessing of the Patriarch is generally required on any building or modification of religious buildings. A decision on the mosque by the Patriarch is still pending. These two fundamentalist groups have recently become more active including organizing boycotts against an Azerbaijani company and disseminating disinformation about the Roman Catholic Church. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: While local authorities have been responsive to the actions against the Talaveri villagers, the GOC appears reluctant to criticize or question the authority of the highly popular Patriarch Ilia II and break with the unofficial tradition of obtaining GOC "permission" before making any decisions concerning religious institutions. These regulations demonstrate that a separation of church and state has yet to be achieved. The harassment of religious minorities continues to be a problem that by all appearances the GOC would rather ignore. End Comment.

They Are Just Fixing a Roof

¶3. (C) Talaveri is a small, rural, traditionally ethnic Azeri village located in the Bolnisi district of Kvemo Kartli in southeastern Georgia. Poloff visited the village and its mosque to participate in the Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan, on September 20. Villagers explained that their mosque was built in 1905. Local residents, with help from Azerbaijan and Russia, were able to raise funds to make repairs to their mosque, including replacing the roof. Their goal was to have the repairs completed in time for the Eid. According to the villagers the local Gamghebeli (district governor) was aware of the project and did not object. However, on September 16, 14 SUV's descended on the village filled with people representing the radical Georgian Orthodox groups, "Society of Saint David the Builder" and "Union of Orthodox Parents." Representatives from the groups demanded to see the villagers' permit for construction on the mosque. The villagers had not obtained any official permission for their work because they viewed it as simple repairs. The radicals also were reportedly threatening villagers with violence if

the construction did not immediately cease. Local police authorities arrived on the scene and took action to diffuse the situation and the Georgian Orthodox group members left peacefully.

Resolution Hinges On Patriarchate

¶4. (C) Lela Jejelava, founder of the religious issues NGO "Conciliation," said that she facilitated a phone call between Patriarch of the GOC Ilia II and Sheikh-Ul-Islam Allah-Shukhur Pasha Zade, the spiritual leader of Caucasian Muslims, about the incident. The two religious leaders decided that construction work should be suspended until official permission could be obtained. As Beka Mindiashvili, in charge of religious and minority integration issues at the Public Defender's Office (PDO), explained, officially these radical orthodox groups have no legal right to demand the villager's permit for construction. The "ownership" of the hundred year-old mosque should fall to the Ministry of Culture as a historical building and any necessary building permits should come from them rather than the GOC. Mindiashvili said, however, that unofficially any work on any religious building in Georgia requires the blessing of the patriarchy of the GOC and that local government officials are reluctant to allow any project to proceed without it. Mindiashvili said that a decision on the mosque has been tabled until the Patriarch returns from a trip to western Georgia. Despite the incident, the villagers said that they are pleased with the support of the local government. During the Eid, the head of the local police for the district (not an ethnic Azeri) joined the celebration and announced that the villagers could commemorate the day in peace. He assured

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them that the local police would ensure that they would not endure harassment from radical Georgian Orthodox groups. Poloff did note at least three police cruisers parked outside the village. Regional Deputy Governor Hussein Iusubov attended the Eid festivities and said that he was personally engaged in discussions with the patriarchate about the issue. In the meantime, one SUV from the radical Georgian Orthodox groups remains posted outside the village to ensure that construction does not resume.

Who Are These Guys?

¶5. (C) It is unclear what formal ties these radical Georgian fundamentalist groups have with the GOC hierarchy. Mindiashvili expressed his belief that these groups would not operate without at least tacit permission from the GOC. GOC officials said that they could not meet with Poloff to discuss the incident until September 25 saying they needed more time to gather information. The "Society of Saint David the Builder," made up of GOC priests, and the "Union of Orthodox Parents," made up of lay persons preaches a return to fundamentalist, conservative and nationalistic values including conducting services in Greek instead of Georgian. According to Mindiashvili, these groups have well-known patrons including Ilia II's nephew, Dmitri Shiolashvili, and former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili (Embassy Note: Post can not confirm that either individual has any relation with the groups. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Mindiashvili also cited speculation that the radical groups are funded by the Russian oil company Lukoil in an effort by the Russians to create internal conflict. On September 15, the two groups picketed nine Socar gas stations in Tbilisi. A pamphlet the groups distributed called on drivers to boycott the Azerbaijani company, a direct competitor of Lukoil, because the company is a "facilitator in the construction of mosques" which was "strengthening the Muslim element" in the country. Mindiashvili also reported that the radical groups are distributing pamphlets warning Georgian Orthodox parents about pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church. A copy of the pamphlet was provided to the Poloff, which includes a translation of a BBC report on "Sex

Crimes and the Vatican" and a picture of Pope John Paul II touching the forehead of a child during what appeared to be a blessing. Mindiashvili felt that the radical groups are becoming more aggressive and are now turning their attention to more "traditional" groups in the country, like the Roman Catholics and the Muslims.

LOGSDON